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Compte rendu de The pearl frontier. Indonesian labor and indigenous encounters in Australia's northern trading network, de Julia Martínez & Adrian Vickers

Roderick Ewins



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RÉFÉRENCE

MARTÍNEZ Julia and Adrian VICKERS, 2015. *The pearl frontier. Indonesian labor and indigenous encounters in Australia's northern trading network*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 227 p., ill. Noir et blanc., bibliogr., index.

- 1 The authors are to be commended on the extensive and meticulous research that went into producing this book, on an industry and time in Australia's history that is little remembered today, and even less understood. The book is not just about pearling and trading, but explores in depth Australia's relationship with its nearest Asian neighbors, particularly during the century from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s. I kept having flashes of recognition of still-current exploitation of the powerless, and of government policies and actions, and the very deep-seated attitudes behind both.
- 2 From the Introduction on, the book shakes the wide perception that significant political and economic relationships between Australia and its neighbors have only developed relatively recently, first during World War 2, then in relation to the emerging independence from colonialism of Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, and since then as Australia attempts to re-imagine itself as part of Asia and persuade Asia to share that idea. Quite apart from the pre-European contacts and connections between indigenous people across the whole region including Australia,

the story told here catalogues the continuous negotiation and re-negotiation of relationships provoked by the pearling industry since before the middle of the 19th Century. It was a vital part of the movement of Indonesian labor throughout the areas bearing pearl-shell beds, that commenced as literal slavery and morphed seamlessly (though not very far) into indentured labor when slavery was technically abolished in the period 1835 (Britain) to 1870 (Holland). As the authors make clear, that indentured system, replete with abuses, carried on into the third quarter of the 20th Century. In fact, recent disclosures of abuses of the 457 Visa system (http://www.liveinaustralia.com/457/visa_descriptions_eligibility.asp) bear an uncanny resemblance to those of the indenture system. There was a recent television investigation of Fijian workers who were housed in conditions very similar to those detailed in this book, and were overworked in their farm jobs but charged so much for the privilege that they ended up with little or nothing in their pay-packets. Such cases (and there are abundant examples) make the disclosures of abuses in the pearling industry of the 19th and 20th Centuries seem not like historical aberrations, but like current standard operating practice for some in Australia. The knowledge that it is the case for Mexicans in the USA, and others in countless countries round the world, makes it worse, not better.

- 3 Pearling was an important, but not the only, component of a phenomenon that strangely re-capitulated the prehistoric spread of Austronesian-speaking settlers from Wallacea. Laborers spread from the Dutch East Indies west to South and East Africa and southeast to Australia and New Caledonia, and like their ancient predecessors, in many cases they formed permanent populations.
- 4 There are two persistent themes playing in counterpoint through this book. One is the pearling industry itself, which up until the 1960s was much less concerned with pearls themselves, than with the great bivalve pearl shells in which these sometimes grow (in particular for the manufacture of buttons). The other is the xenophobia and racism that pervaded both Dutch-Indonesian and British-Australian colonialism, and were directed at the indigenous populations of Southeast Asia and Australia alike. The Dutch East Indies authorities consistently sought to both control and profit from their “subjects”, and arm-wrestled Australia for the right to do so. Australia moved to import “Malays” (roughly, Bahasa speakers from the Malay Peninsula/Singapore, and the Indonesian archipelago) as well as Japanese, for the pearling industry, and then to exploit, manipulate and impose harsh limitations on these same workers and their dependents. From the beginning of the 20th Century, they were able to use the Immigration Restriction Act that underpinned the notorious but long-lived “White Australia Policy”.¹
- 5 However, as the authors describe with commendably controlled irony, when immigration policy threatened enormously lucrative industries, legal accommodation was sought and found, such as waiving, or at least severely bending, the Immigration Restriction Act to permit the importation of Malays, Indonesians, Chinese and Japanese directly involved in pearling, and permitting many of them to stay for decades. Further, the fact that the pearling industry was conducted on the remote shores of the north and northwest of the country, meant that controls were few and abuses unchecked. And when their usefulness to Australia ended, the country had no scruples about forcibly repatriating the unfortunate workers, even those who had established families with Aboriginal women.

- 6 The middle chapters of the book trace the development, heights and depths of the industry, and the various islands and ports out of which the luggers operated. It also gives a clear picture of the principal, though unprincipled, “pearling masters” who lived like rajahs while ruthlessly exploiting their laborers. I sometimes found long passages here rather heavy going, as they could become a bit like reading all the “begats” in the Old Testament. The social issues, though obviously very much in the minds of the authors, can and too often do become submerged under the weight of historical minutiae and detailed individual biographies.
- 7 That said, the authors certainly do convey a very clear picture of the hardship suffered by the workers, from the extreme dangers and fatalities suffered by the divers themselves, to the very arduous labor of their crews, with poor provisions and worse than poor living conditions. I found it particularly hard to read the manner in which the “pearling masters” were able to enlist the authorities to enforce their interests if any of the labor force complained about conditions or their generally pitiful wages. Men were imprisoned for refusing to sign totally exploitative indentures, and only released when they agreed to do so. If they protested too volubly they could be imprisoned, deported, or both.
- 8 It is interesting to learn about the multiple hierarchies that were imposed first by race, then by designated task, and finally by ability. The image of the pearling industry in Australia has generally been that it relied on the Japanese, and by World War I it was indeed the case that most of the actual divers *were* Japanese. But at the start of the industry, in the mid to late 19th Century, all of the work, including the diving, was carried out by crews of “Malays” (numerically mostly from Indonesia), and they continued to provide the support crews for the Japanese divers as these entered the industry and came to dominate the top echelon. The racism implicit in this hierarchy was in part due to the expertise of the Japanese divers, but that it went beyond that is shown by the fact that in the 20th Century the children of Chinese and Japanese in Darwin and Broome could attend white schools, while the Malays and “Koepangers” (as all East Indonesians came to be called, after Kupang in Timor) were restricted to the Aboriginal schools. Despite this ghettoization, the authorities remained intent on racial separation to prevent the development of a settled mixed-descent population. The Darwin cinema is given as exemplifying the social and ethnic segregation: in the Sun Picture Theatre whites sat in the middle, Asians around the periphery according to group, and Aboriginals at the back. The questionably-styled “Protectors of Aboriginals” moved to prevent inter-ethnic marriages occurring, and refused to acknowledge those made according to local tradition.
- 9 The next section of the book deals with the impact of World War 2 which actually caused a hiatus in the pearling industry, in part because of the internment of all Japanese “enemy aliens” (as happened in the U.S. too, of course), and the other stresses of war. The numerous crew members were first relocated (with their families, if they had them) from the northern towns to other parts of Australia where they took on various jobs. A number of them were actually conscripted into the armed forces, sometimes with promises of benefits and citizenship which were, of course, never honored at the end of the War. Then, as passions rose with the passage of the War, many of the Malays and Koepangers still at liberty in Melbourne, Adelaide etc. were interned along with Japanese (including POWs), despite the fact that they had shown no evidence of partisanship. It should of course be remembered that Australia also

interned its Italian population, many of whom had also lived here for decades, were thoroughly integrated into and made a solid contribution to Australian society.

- 10 Australia had difficulty navigating through the political landscape after the War, with the rise of nationalism in British Malaya and Dutch Indonesia, which led to independence in both cases. Also, a resurgent Japan wished to engage once more in pearling in waters that Australia had claimed. The precarious and dynamic relationships that emerged had a strong impact both on the recruitment of laborers and on the lives and security of Malays and Indonesians still living in Australia. The situation was particularly difficult in the case of the many Indonesians in Australia's own Thursday Island. Despite all this, the market of pearl shell actually climaxed in 1957, after which it steadily declined. By the 1960s, the new technique of cultivating pearls gradually displaced the old pearl-shell industry, and survives still, but the need for labor persisted, as did the demands of pearl-masters that they be permitted to continue their exploitative "bad old ways". The manner in which the government and unions largely acceded to their demands makes, as usual, very uncomfortable reading.
- 11 Finally, the book looks at the lives of many of the surviving pearl-crew, in particular Koepangers, and their struggle to become naturalized after the War, despite in some cases having lived and worked in Australia since early in the century. A few of the stories told here had happy endings, many did not. The extraordinary lengths to which some politicians went to maintain the discrimination against these people, despite their long and productive lives in Australia, their loyalty and in many cases active service during the War, and their acceptance into at least some parts of the Australian community, beggars belief. It is argued that despite heroic efforts to disguise this in terms of security and social necessity, it cannot be seen as anything but racism. Again the resonances are inescapable, with current and recent Australian governments' attitudes and actions toward refugees arriving by boat. Some of the arguments employed by Australian politicians on both sides of politics today sound eerily like those used by Arthur ("Cocky") Calwell in the years after WW2, but as in his case, they do not stand close scrutiny.
- 12 I am sure it is clear that many of the connections drawn in this review are mine and not the authors', particularly those relating to current events and recent government actions (and inaction) in Australia. However, the sense of injustice that I felt on behalf of the laborers and their families is understandably evident on the part of the authors also. There is no way this is an easy read. It would have been impossible for the authors to produce a sanitized version of an industry so mired in greed, exploitation, and racism – and had they tried to do so, the result would have been both untruthful and insipid, which this certainly is not. As it is, they produced a well researched, clearly and sympathetically written account of an industry that seemed to distil and concentrate much of what was worst in colonialism and neo-colonialism, and highlight the incapacity of even well-intentioned politicians to control it.

NOTES

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Australia_policy I reviewed for Pacific Affairs the excellent study of the history of the Chinese in Australia between 1860 and 1940, *Beyond the Rush* (<http://www.justpacific.com/pacific/papers/rush.pdf>), and many of the persistent themes there recur here.

AUTEUR

RODERICK EWINS

University of Tasmania